

ETHNIC ARTISTS AND THE APPROPRIATION OF FASHION: EMBROIDERY AND IDENTITY IN CAYLLOMA, PERU

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the relationship between color, materials, and design in contemporary embroidered clothing made in traditional styles in highland Caylloma, Arequipa, Peru. The author argues that embroidered clothes represent the revitalization and contestation of traditional values in the rural villages where they are made and worn. The artisans ongoing appropriation of foreign materials and designs into the established repertoire represents Caylloma's insertion in global political economy.

Key words: Ethnicity, art, aesthetics, fashion, clothing, Peru, Andes

RESUMEN

Este artículo discute la relación entre el color, la materia prima y los diseños de bordados contemporáneos en vestimentas hechas con estilos tradicionales, en las tierras altas de Caylloma, Arequipa, Perú. La autora argumenta que las vestimentas bordadas representan una revitalización y disputa de los valores tradicionales en aldeas rurales donde éstas son hechas y usadas. El proceso de apropiación de los artesanos de materias primas y diseños foráneos dentro de los repertorios establecidos representa la inserción de Caylloma en la política económica global.

Palabras claves: Etnicidad, arte, estética, moda, vestimenta, Perú, Andes.

When I'm in Arequipa and I see a lady in embroidered clothes, I always greet her;

she's from my land, she's my compatriot.... [When I teach embroidery], no matter how much one teaches, the motifs don't come out the same. If there are twenty embroiderers, twenty different motifs come out although they have the same name. It's like, even if you're my brother, we're not the same.

Comments by embroidery artist Leonardo Mejía neatly express the character of Caylloma's ethnic clothes: simultaneously shared and individual. Similar appearance is important in recognizing a compatriot, but an artist's style of executing the complex embroidered designs distinguishes his/her work.

Contemporary textile production in Caylloma Province, centered in the Colca Valley, a highland region of southern Peru, occurs mostly in small workshops (Figure 1). Men and women embroider and tailor ornate clothes on treadle sewing machines. About 150 artisans provide garments for about 8,000 female consumers (total province population is about 35,000). This article draws on surveys that my research associates and I conducted with 110 artisans and vendors, during two years of fieldwork¹.

Textiles are important emblems of ethnic identity, as is commonly observed. However, I want to move beyond seeing "emblems" as superficial symbols, and to analyze ethnicity as a concept: As a relation of power among social groups with profoundly different resources. The rural, Quechua-speaking Colca Valley peoples are often considered "Indians" by outsiders, but they do not identify themselves as such. *Indio* in Peru is a powerful epithet

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Figura 1. Susana Bernal and Leonardo Mejía embroidering in their home workshop, Coporaque, Peru, 1986.

that accentuates class difference and disguises it in racial terms. The social and economic roles that Colca Valley men and women play in Peruvian society have changed considerably in this century, and increasingly so in this generation. Ethnic artists have been crucial in mediating change as they continue to produce ethnic clothes.

Through observing everyday and festival garments, discussing aesthetics with women who wear those garments, and analyzing the artisan surveys, I came to realize how important color and materials had become. In these domains, ethnic artists appropriate national and international taste according to local cultural preferences, which in turn help to develop and maintain discrete ethnic identities.

Synthetic materials and bright colors are relatively new fashionable elements in embroidered clothes. The focus of this article reflects the fact that in the Colca Valley, lime green yarn is more of a fashion concern than are changing hemlines. By focusing on “foreign” elements, I aim to release them from their conceptual closet, and address how and why they became firmly established in the Colca clothing repertoire. The very brightness that is exalted as “lively” by those who use it, is all too often derided as “gaudy” by outsiders, even by textile scholars. This attitude inheres in our concepts of authenticity and identity. As scholars, we need to ask how we are also caught up in appropriation when we choose which textiles to analyze.

My approach challenges an older tendency in Andean textile studies, which for many decades privileged an “authentic” indigenous textile: woven, of natural fibers, in a domestic setting, using techniques traced to pre-Columbian antecedents². Numerous embroidered garments are worn in Caylloma-skirt (Figures 2, 3), blouse, jacket, shawl, belt, hat. All have some technical and design elements in common, but few resemble pre-Columbian models. In this paper, I neither provide much technical information about the embroidery and construction processes nor do I focus on the evolution of a single garment or on design motifs (topics that are developed further in Femenías 1997). Here, I focus on the garments as embodiments of artisans’ ideas about design and aesthetics. An artist’s style emerges as he or she incorporates specific colors, materials and techniques into these handmade objects,



Figura 2. Detail of skirt embroidered by Susana Bernal, 1992. Collection of the author. Ground fabric is royal blue acrylic knit. Rows of trim (top to bottom) feature lace, yarn, lace, yarn, monochrome white embroidery on red nylon ground, yarn, lace, with a wide band of hot pink yarn at center; these repeat in reverse order to the hem. The swirl pattern of the fourth row from top (repeats five times) is the design that Rosalía criticized.



Figura 3. Detail of skirt embroidered by Hugo Vilcape, Cabanaconde, 1993. Ground fabric is garnet crushed velvet. Rows of trim (top to bottom) are rickrack, braid (two rows), lace, with polychrome embroidery on blue acetate satin band at center; these repeat in reverse order to the hem.

combining his/her understanding of contemporary fashions as well as established conventional patterns.

When I tell non-Peruvians that I work in the Andes, they usually ask, "Are the people there Indians?". The answer is Yes. And No. There is no easy, straightforward way to answer this question. In fact, I am convinced that "Are they Indians?" is ultimately the wrong question. We need to ask, "When are they Indians? Why are they Indians?" and, at heart, "What is an Indian?" The valley's residents claim for themselves a unique identity that is not simply Indian, white, or mestizo; rather, this localized identity is based in specific cultural and material reality. In fact, understanding what kind of identity is Peruvian Indian identity today involves unraveling a whole series of complex, sensitive racial and political issues which combine race, class, and gender.

THE COLCA VALLEY: A PLACE WITHIN A REGION

The Colca Valley is a rural area near Arequipa, the second largest city in Peru³. Wedged between massive snowcapped peaks, terraced fields support the agricultural and pastoral lifeways in fourteen small villages. In one larger town, Chivay (population about 5,000), the capital of Caylloma province, most of the embroidery workshops are located. In and around the other villages, people live primarily by growing maize and other crops and by herding *alpacas* and selling their wool. The thick and lustrous *alpaca* fiber has been a major source of commercial wealth for the past century.

The ethnic heritage of the peoples is Inka and pre-Inka, including Collagua and Cabana groups, and Spanish. Almost everyone is bilingual in Quechua and Spanish. Archaeological and historical documentation show that outside intervention, rather than isolation, has characterized the valley's political economy for about two thousand years.

In the 1990s, low prices for crops and *alpaca*, severe droughts which almost paralyzed agriculture, an earthquake, and numerous political and economic factors eroded the resource base of the mountain communities. These problems accelerated migration to the cities. Since the 1950s, for example, the city of Arequipa has quintupled in population, from 200,000 to 1 million inhabitants.

In Arequipa, and in Lima, the national capital, young men and women work mostly in the informal sector: as street vendors, domestic servants, taxi drivers, and/or petty smugglers. Migrants living in Arequipa return to the valley quickly, in a four-hour bus trip. Young people in particular bring back their tastes and their money, and women spend some of their hard-earned money on the fabulous embroidered clothes.

POWER AND APPROPRIATION

One phrase in this article's title, "the appropriation of fashion," may mislead the reader. Perhaps "appropriation in fashion," "as fashion" or even "fashion as appropriation" would convey my meaning better. The appropriation of fashion sounds as if fashion is an alien concept that ethnic artists must appropriate, having no fashion of their own. Nothing could be further from my intention. Changes in appearance and representation occur constantly among indigenous peoples as much as in so-called modern societies. These changes occur in ways that are structured in part by the power imbalances among groups. Colca Valley ethnic clothes are not survivals from ancient groups in isolated enclaves. They derive their ethnic meaning in part from the act of appropriation.

This appropriation has occurred in part through incorporating materials produced outside the valley. Lightweight polyester blouse fabric, acrylic yarn, crushed velvet, and silvery lace are now elements of traditional embroidered Colca Valley clothes. While some of these materials are used exclusively for Caylloma clothes, most are appropriated from

the non-indigenous domain of white, national Peruvian society, where they are featured in an office-worker's blouse, housewife's sweater, or wedding gown. On the other hand, traditional materials are no longer as readily available as in the past. *Alpaca* wool, in particular, is almost all sold on the international market.

"To appropriate" literally means "to set apart for...a particular use in exclusion of all other uses" or "to take to oneself" that is, "to claim or use as by an exclusive right," according to Webster's Seventh Unabridged Dictionary. The Latin root, *proprius*, means "one's own."

Whatever the new owner takes to herself and makes her own originates outside the person or group, so we must ask by what right she claims it. I argue that such a right must inhere in a shared understanding of what is acceptable and what is not, based in concepts of power and its limits. Closeness, not distance, is the crucial factor: The closer two groups are, the more important a small detail of distinction becomes. In this case, as the importance of racial basis of Indian identity decreases, that of clothes as markers increases. Clothes mark the border between dominant and subordinate groups.

For a border to be meaningful, it must be shared. Borders are challenged when subordinate groups will not agree to the same meanings, appropriate items from the dominant group, and so refuse to acknowledge that item as the dominator's "own." I believe this has occurred in the Colca Valley through a two-way process of appropriation of materials.

Discussions of appropriation usually focus on the dominant taking from the subordinate groups: by actively appropriating their material and symbolic resources, the dominant enforce the subordination of those below them. Resistance then becomes the defiance of such appropriation. James Scott, for example, prominent among scholars of everyday resistance, defines resistance as the subordinate enacting strategies to minimize appropriation or to reverse it (Scott 1990: 197, emphasis added). Thus, small daily "rituals of subordination", which include wearing items of clothes and performing gestures of deference, become "rituals of reversal" (Scott 1990: 187-88)⁴.

Appropriation in reverse, or from below, is as important as that from above, and it is not adequately analyzed as resistance alone. Emulation and appropriation are important strategies to establish different claims to power, not only to resist the existing power structure, as has been noted recently by Abu-Lughod (1990) and Radner and Lanser (1993). The inter-relationships between domination and subordination are intimate antagonisms, which are never completely separate, but always contain elements of each other⁵.

PRETTY CLOTHES, LOCAL CUSTOM, AND CHANGING MATERIALS: RESULTS FROM THE ARTISAN SURVEYS

To dance in *fiestas*, and to understand the production and exchange process, I obtained my own set of embroidered clothes. I commissioned my friend Susana Bernal (Figure 1) to embroider two skirts (*polleras*; one is shown in Figure 2) for me. When I showed the finished skirts to other people, many of them praised their quality and beauty. However, one older female artisan, Rosalía, heaped scorn on Susana's choice of designs and materials. "That's already old-fashioned. Why did she use that outmoded design?" she demurred, pointing to two rows of lime green yarn (Figure 2). I was stunned. I had looked forward so to dressing in the valley style, wearing the latest in *pollera* fashion, flawlessly executed by my talented friend. Yet Rosalía put them down; my skirts were not fashionable enough!

Many North Americans have a phobia about bright colors. For a long time, I was among them. I came to appreciate the bright colors after a long period of rejecting them. I did not always like lime green. In other conversations with artisans about tourist sales, I never hesitated to point out to them that *gringos* abhor this color. An internal struggle preceded my decision to let Susana embroider my skirt exactly as she saw fit; I chose only the background fabric from the options she offered. After all, she was the expert. I could

not bring myself to tell her, “I don’t want any lime green, it reminds me of neon, acid, Gatorade”. Indeed, lime green ended up in my skirt. I got used to it, I got to like it, I began to understand that it is an established element of authentic Colca clothes.

It is worth considering seriously why such colors claim an important place in Colca textiles- and have done so far so long that, just as I began to warm them, local people were already beginning consider them pass!. In addition, Rosalía’s comments showed me that artists’s opinions about embroidery aesthetics and fashions vary widely, and their critical assessments of each other’s work are often sharp indeed.

Leonardo Mejía, who I quoted at the beginning, says that embroidery is not just a business; it “is an art that should be highly esteemed. I think this way but others think only about their business. It is an artistic question and not an economic one”.

Leonardo is the most adamant among those who claim embroidery as an art form, but he is not alone in recognizing the artists’s role in shaping the ethnic and aesthetic consciousness of valley residents. My analysis of color and materials is based on artists’s answers to qualitative questions about preferences, tastes, reasons women wear embroidered clothes, and changes.

In the words of Fermín Huaypuna, embroidered clothing “is part of the imagination and it is tradition, custom, and it reproduces the ancestors’ creation”. In fact, “custom” (*costumbre*) was the term most commonly used in explaining why women wear embroidered clothes. References to “ancestors” (*antepasados*) and various relatives (*abuelos*, “grandparents”, I, “mother”) were also frequent, as was “tradition” (*tradición*).

Artists often state that women wear the garments “because they are pretty” (*porque son bonitos*). “Pretty” (*bonito*) was cited by over a third of respondents, making it the next most common term after custom. A related usage, *porque es bonito*, connotes “suitable, nice”. By why, I press, in what way are they pretty?

When artists discussed prettiness, they did so in terms of aesthetic or technical features. These features include questions of ethnic differentiation, amount and quality of materials, and innovation. To summarize briefly, the first distinction is one of overall quality. *Polleras* come in different grades: the one that I commissioned (Figure 2) was second quality, gauged by the type of materials used for ground fabric and trim, number of rows of embroidery, amount of color in that embroidery, amount of other trim, and kind of yarn applied. If we compare this *pollera* to a first-quality skirt from Cabanaconde (Figure 3), we see that the first-quality skirt has more expensive ground fabric, polychrome embroidered bands, and more detailed yarn designs. The ethnic differences are manifested in materials, as well as designs: only in Cabanaconde is rick-rack used, and the monkey motif is more common there. The designs and materials are continually changing, leading to a situation in which traditional clothes are equated with the modern.

Livia Sullca, for example, maintains that “the embroidery is more modern, we apply more materials, we put on plenty of decorations”. Leandrina Ramos says admiringly, more is better: “before it was simpler, now they’re more adorned. The skirts are more embroidered every year”. Not only are fabrics and trims more numerous than those available in the past, artisans maintain, but superior. They mention specific yarns and trims: merino yarn, *brillos* (metallic lace), *grecas* (braids, often metallic), as well as fabrics—including velvet, chiffon, *poliseda* (“polysilk”)—a daunting array too lengthy to dwell on here. I collected over 100 samples (including multiple colorways of the same fabric) from four artisan workshops, which by no means exhausts all the materials. In addition to knowing techniques and designs, artists must command a huge vocabulary of materials.

When I examined the actual decorations on the garments to samples I collected terms used for them, I could not find any sheep wool, so I was puzzled about “*merino*”; later I realized that here it is not wool, but a synthetic equivalent also used for weaving. It is

available in many vivid colors, as well as white. The typical “bright colors” (*colores vivos*)—pink, orange, and lime green—are used in background fabrics as well as trims. More recently “pastel shades” (*colores agua*) of the same colors are making inroads, but the lively colors still dominate.

One day I asked about the lime green, calling it light green in Spanish, “*verde claro*”. The artisan corrected me, “No, it’s called *q’achu verde*”. I learned that *q’achu* in Quechua means light only in certain contexts. One cannot say “light blue”, *q’achu azul*. *Q’achu* also means new crops, forage, and by extension, freshness. A Quechua-Spanish dictionary, defines *q’achu* as “*forraje, pasto verde; q’achu q’omer, verde claro; ... q’achu ch’uñu, chuño fresco, recién helado*” (forage, green pasture; light green, fresh freeze-dried potatoes, recently frozen, Cusihuamán 1976: 117; on *q’achu* as forage, see also Treacy 1994a: 191).

The emergence of young crops in the naturally dry environment of the Colca Valley is precious and precarious. Contrasting with the gray and brown landscape, new plants vibrate very greenly indeed. The use of *q’achu verde* accents affirms the importance of these green growing things, which feed people and animals (see also Seibold 1995).

However, this cannot explain the apparent preference for synthetic materials. I believe this aspect of appropriation inheres more in the valley’s position in the world economy. Cash crops, such as barley, the sale of *alpaca* fiber, and urban migration have increasingly enmeshed the Colca Valley peoples in a capitalist system. Local *alpaca* fiber is rarely available; it is almost always sold to the Arequipa textile factories. Likewise, the scarcity of fine-breed sheep wool, like *merino*, reflects long-standing extractive economic policies and lack of incentives for herd improvement?

Many artisans, both male and female, as well as their customers, are returned migrants. Their urban work experience changed both their taste and their buying power. Their understanding of fashion trends undergirds their roles as “ethnicity brokers” in their own communities. Once they return, they continue to travel. To obtain materials, artisans often venture as far as the Bolivian or Chilean border, or even to the United States.

CONCLUSION

Caylloma’s embroidered clothes represent both the revitalization and contestation of traditional values by all those who seek to legitimize their claims to community resources, either by participating in the production process, or by wearing the clothes in their home communities or even in distant cities. In the narrowly proscribed, racist national society, opportunities to display pride in their local, ethnic identity are rare. Clothes provide one such opportunity.

To the national society, “Indian” (and even the Quechua term *runa*) means a rural dweller, poor and powerless, living off subsistence agriculture, practicing a “natural” economy of kin-based exchange. Anyone with money or power, therefore, cannot be an Indian. Thus the kind of ethnic identity claimed by Colca peoples is not Indianness. Yet, they appropriate what they can from a capitalist system, and parlay it into ethnic symbols. Increasingly, Colca Valley peoples use their own dress to contest their subordinate position. For example, when women participate in local, and even national, politics, wearing elaborate embroidered clothes is *de rigueur* (see Femenías 1997).

To move beyond stereotypical views of indigenous ethnic identity, we must attend to the artists’s opinions and values. We cannot afford to dismiss new traditions by relegating them to the category of novelties, or denying them “authentic” status. Textile studies grounded in the analysis of power relations can explain the continued viability of clothes as ethnic symbols. Ethnicity itself cannot be understood by cataloguing distinct cultural traits of different groups. We must also examine how, and why, some groups choose objects or

processes from others, usually considered dominant over them, in order to create distinct objects that embody cultural and ethnic identities.

In doing so, it becomes clear how closely bound up fashion is with questions of choice, of people's right to self-representation. Issues of taste, color, and materials are far from trivial; they all figure into the politics of authenticity. For this reason I have singled out lime green, and raised my defense of the gaudy.

The artists whom I interviewed eloquently expressed their pride in their work, and their hope that it would continue to grow and change. In the words of Fermín Huaypuna, "since it now has regional, national, and —why not say so— worldwide prestige, I believe that [our] embroidery will endure forever".

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NOTES

- ¹ Elsewhere, I have about Caylloma Embroidered dress as a regional phenomenon (Femenías 1996 [1991]), and my thesis (Femenías 1997) provides a fuller discussion of the ambiguities of clothing and representation.
- ² For one important analysis that centers on woven textiles, see Rowe (1977); for an overview of related scholarship, see Femenías (1987). On embroidery, which also flourished in pre-Columbian times, see, for example, Paul (1990).
- ³ Many recent publications discuss the Colca Valley; on history, see Benavides (1988), Flores Galindo (1977), Manrique (1985), and Pease's edited volume (1977); on agriculture, irrigation, and social organization, Gelles (1994), Guillet (1992), Paerregaard (1994), and Treacy (1994^a, 1994b); on pastoralism, Markowitz (1992); on rituals and festivals, Valderrama and Escalante (1988).
- ⁴ My use of appropriation is broader than Scott's; he more closely follows Marxist traditions, in which appropriation used relates to labor, and is closely connected to the process of alienation. That is, the appropriation of a person's labor, into the workforce is a crucial step in establishing capitalist relations of production, and in alienating the worker from his or her own product.
- ⁵ Other authors who discuss related topics for the Andes are Rasnake (1988) and Smith (1989). Rasnake's exploration of culture as a domain of resistance veers toward a more traditional Andeanism, but he provides evidence of the resilience of cultural institutions in Bolivia. On landlord-peasant relations in Central Peru, Smith notes that cultural expressions are not resistance of a completely different sort than class conflict, but that both are political.